

L. NRO  
John

13 June 1964

Dear Brock:

On May 25.h you wrote to me suggesting the possibility of using the ATLAS-AGENA and the GAMBIT type of platform as a launching vehicle for the CORONA payload. This would replace the THOR-AGENA booster.

I will be interested in the results of the analysis which you indicate in the final sentence of your letter are in process at the present time.

At first glance it appears to me that additional costs and the availability of the ATLAS-AGENA combinations might weigh heavily in the decision. This would be particularly true if there are developing increasing demands for GAMBIT shots along the lines as some have advocated during the past few months.

I appreciate this suggestion was made during the darkest hours of CORONA troubles. Perhaps the recent success will also influence the final decision. In any event, please let me hear from you when this study is finished so that we can reach a conclusion, and certainly we must do all possible to improve the dependability of the CORONA.

Sincerely,

/s/

John A. McCone  
Director

Dr. Brockway McMillan  
Director, NRO  
Department of Defense  
Washington, D. C.

cc: SecDef

JAM:mcm/mfb

Original - Addressee #1,

#2 - Sec/Defense

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1 - DCI Chrono #3

1 - DCI NRO File w/basic #4

1 - ER #5

1 - DDCI #6

1 - Dr. Wheelon #7

1 - NIPE #8

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5 June 1964

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT : Proposal to Install CORONA Camera in  
GE Orbital Vehicle

REFERENCE : Memorandum from DNRO to SecDef and  
DCI, dated 25 May 1964 (BYE-22890-64)

1. Dr. McMillan mentioned to me during a meeting three weeks ago that he was giving consideration to installing CORONA cameras in the GE GAMBIT orbital vehicle but indicated that this was more of a scare tactic to cause Lockheed to 'pull up its socks'. He did indicate that he was looking into the technical feasibility of doing this, but we have not been a party to any of these subsequent discussions. I am honestly surprised that he is now coming forward with a solid proposition to do this.

2. Without having the detailed ingredients of the decision available to us, I can only offer a superficial technical judgment which all of us share:

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a) By going to the GE orbital vehicle, one requires an ATLAS booster rather than a THOR, and this will increase the launch cost for each shot. It is not clear to me that we have enough ATLAS' per year to maintain both the GAMBIT and CORONA launch schedules as now envisaged.

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b) One must count on a very significant development time to install the CORONA cameras in the GAMBIT vehicle and achieve reliability of the new launch vehicle/payload combination. Even on the basis of GAMBIT experience, I doubt if this were less than one year and could run to two.

c) By going to a new camera/spacecraft combination, one is buying a whole set of new - and unknown - reliability problems which will have to be worked out over a period of time.

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We are not persuaded that the GAMBIT attitude control system is more reliable than the AGENA although it is clearly more accurate. On the other hand, this accuracy is not required for the CORONA shot. In general, I think that both in the spacecraft and the launch cost, we are overdoing the problem at the expense of reliability, cost and possible conflicting demands on limited resources.

d) Another factor in my thinking is that this modification program may well not come to operational maturity before FULCRUM could be made available, and I question whether we want an interim system whose technical capability is no better than CORONA

3. The fact of the matter is that CORONA launched by a THOR-AGENA has worked reliably in the past and can be made to work reliably again. On the surface of it, I am persuaded that we can clean up any current problems in the AGENA far more cheaply and readily than we can reconfigure an entire system to fly an ATLAS with the GAMBIT spacecraft. I recommend that you sign a very strong note to McMillan, perhaps along the lines attached demanding that he show just cause to all of us why this radical step should be pursued.

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ALBERT D. WHEELON  
Deputy Director  
for  
Science and Technology

Attachment:

BYE-0077-64

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D/NIPE  
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**MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of National Reconnaissance Office****SUBJECT : Proposal to Install CORONA Cameras in  
GE Orbital Vehicle**

1. The problem of CORONA reliability has been a major concern to the intelligence community for the past year as you well know. However, your recent proposal to use an ATLAS-AGENA booster and the GAMBIT spacecraft to carry a CORONA camera into orbit raises even more serious questions in our minds.

2. It is quite clear that the launch cost per mission will increase if you go to the ATLAS booster combination. We also wonder if there are enough ATLAS' to sustain both GAMBIT and CORONA over the next two years. Our preliminary view is that it is simpler to solve the reliability problems in the AGENA - a system which has proved reliable in previous use - than it is to face up to a whole new series of problems associated with the launch vehicle/spacecraft/camera combination envisaged in your proposal.

3. I regard such a step as a major decision in the NRP and one which will require extensive study both in the DOD and by the CIA. I should like you to bring to CIA both your preliminary analyses and any final study as they become available so that we may participate in the evaluation of this proposal. Unless we are jointly persuaded that such a course is in the best National interest, I will oppose any such proposal.

**JOHN A. McCONE**  
Director

cc: SecDef

O/DD/S&T:ADWheelon:jlp:7713 (5 June 1964)  
1-DNRO; 2-SecDef; 3-DCI; 4-ER; 5-DDCI; 6-D/NIPE;  
7-ExDir-Comp; 8-DD/S&T Subject; 9-DD/S&T Chrono

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